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ABSTRACT

A study examined the quantity and quality of language produced by kindergarten and early primary Native American pupils in relation to selected factors in the classroom context in which the language was produced. Observations of about 50 classrooms were conducted in schools serving predominantly Native American pupils on and off reservations in New Mexico. A rating sheet was used to evaluated the sociocultural environment of the classrooms. Results showed that informal classroom organization with flexible arrangement of furniture and emphasis on group work enhanced language learning. Other factors relating positively to language learning were situations in which the locus of control was shared by teachers and pupils, where there was an emphasis on cooperative learning and dialogue patterns involving pupils to a great degree, and in which culturally relevant materials or activities were used. (MSE)

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Sociocultural Context and Language Learning of Native American Pupils

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SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING OF NATIVE AMERICAN PUPILS

In one primary classroom, Native American pupils are alert, active and intensely involved in a discussion of a book the teacher has just read to them. In another, pupils are grouped for various purposes in different locations within the room while the teacher works with several children in reinforcing word attack skills. In still another, the teacher is working with a reading group while the other pupils are engaged in completing worksheets, writing experience stories or finishing art projects. All three of these classrooms have in common the busy hum of learning taking place. These are not quiet classrooms by any means. Rather, they are characterized by the productive din of pupils who are interested and involved in what they are doing. In addition, the psychological climate is a comfortable, safe one in which pupils are free to be themselves, to make mistakes and to help one another.

Contrast this with classrooms in which the emphasis is on written work, pupils generally work independently of one another and the interaction is mainly between teacher and pupil in a formal lecture/discussion mode. These classrooms are more silent than those described earlier. There is learning taking place

here, too. But to the observer, the opportunities for learning language in a meaningful context seem much more restricted.

As a population, Native American students do not fare well in the educational settings provided by the dominant society. Continued low achievement and high drop out rates bear witness to the fact that serious problems exist. The longer that Indian students remain in school, the wider the gap becomes between the achievement of these students and the majority population.

Certainly cultural barriers between home and school offer a partial explanation for the educational performance of Native Americans. However, more specifically, language differences appear to be a major stumbling block to school progress.

Many Indian tribes have retained the native language as a basis of communication. On the Navajo reservation, for example, approximately one-fourth of the children entering school speak Navajo only. Of the pupils who enter with some facility in English many are Navajo - dominant. Since the Navajo language differs significantly from English, the task of acquiring English as a second language is an onerous one for pupils. Other Indian tribes, for example the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, retain native language facility too.

Communication skills are vital to school achievement. Children who lack language facility find each year in school destructive of their self image and levels of aspiration as well. As we know, oral language facility is a prerequisite to success in reading and writing. Building oral language skills is a major emphasis in kindergarten and the early grades. This emphasis is particularly important when pupils enter school with a language base other than English.

Thus it was that isolation of factors which appear to promote optimum oral language development of Native American pupils in the classroom setting became the focus of a research project that I conducted recently while on sabbatical leave from my University. I made observations of kindergarten and primary pupils engaged in normal classroom routines in both reservation and non-reservation schools serving a majority of Native American students in two Southwestern states. Both public schools and schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs were included, in addition to several "contract" schools. (The latter are schools which are funded by the Federal government but administered by Indian tribes themselves.)

Traditionally, Native American pupils have been labelled "uncommunicative" in school. At this point in time, however,

this appears to be no longer true, particularly in the kindergarten and early primary grades. Head Start may have had no small part in launching Indian pupils successfully on their school careers. The emphasis on informality and attention to developing the oral language skills of pupils appear to carry over to the school setting. Young Indian children who have attended Head Start enter the kindergarten with a backlog of successful experiences and a stronger base in oral English. In addition, Head Start builds upon the home culture of pupils and helps to make the transition from home to school a smoother, less traumatic one.

For the purposes of this descriptive study, I defined an optimum language learning environment as one in which the use of oral and written language appeared to be encouraged in a variety of settings; the quantity and quality of language seemed appropriate for the age and grade level of pupils; and the active involvement and participation of pupils in on-going activities was evident. Classrooms were rated on a five point scale as to the degree to which these characteristics were in evidence.

The data sheet I developed provided space for expanding upon the rating given to each classroom observed. Factors which were given attention during the observation included: (1) the

type of classroom organization from traditional to open; (2) locus of classroom control teacher-dominant to pupil/teacher shared; (3) evidence of cooperative learning-little to much; (4) teacher/pupil dialogue patterns from formal to informal; (5) evidence of the use of culture-oriented curriculum materials and activities.

In addition, I used a tape recorder to gather samples of pupils' language during the 15 minute time span I spent in each classroom. Later, I analyzed each sample using the Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) technique. The following discussion is a result of relating the rating of each classroom observed, as recorded on the data sheet, to the quality and quantity of pupils' speech during the observation period as indicated by the MLU pattern.

First of all, I found that the type of classroom organization which appeared to enhance language learning was less formal and more open as indicated by high ratings on the data sheet. Whether or not the teacher was a Native American from the local community did not seem to be significant factor. What did make the difference, apparently, was that pupils were more relaxed and prone to express themselves in settings in which classroom furniture was arranged flexibly and group work was encouraged.

It seems that opportunities to make choices and to assume responsibility for one's own actions that are characteristic of open or informal learning settings may blend well with the child-rearing practices of many traditional Native American families. In addition, because the traditional Indian perspective of time is somewhat different from that of non-Indians, a less formal approach to education with more flexible use of time may be a better fit with the way young Indian pupils relate to time.

Locus of control was another factor examined. Locus of control relates to the degree of informality present in the teaching/learning arena. There are times when it is important that the locus of control is the teacher. However, when the control rarely passes from teacher to pupils, children are deprived of opportunities to develop self discipline. Additionally, social control in the form of peer pressure fails to operate and the teacher bears the burden of responsibility for all behavior in the classroom.

Language is part of the social development of the individual. In the classrooms I observed where the locus of control was shared by teacher and pupils, many possibilities arose for use of language in the development of social skills based on a model of democratic living. Also, one of the focal values of traditional

Native American culture emphasizes the freedom and dignity of the individual. Although young Indian children are taught to respect their elders, they are encouraged to develop self discipline. In the socialization process, peer pressure is used in the form of teasing, in many cases, to regulate individual behavior. Thus in the study when Indian pupils shared the locus control with the teacher, language learning seemed to be enhanced.

It is my hypothesis, borne out by multiple observations in diverse settings, that many Native American pupils tend to be field-sensitive learners. Thus they are much more "in tune" with their surroundings and the psychological mileau which exists and they seem to function more effectively when a personal relationship with the teacher has been established. Again, if we look at how young Indians are reared traditionally, we shall discover an emphasis on cooperation and sharing. The Native American child is not "programmed" culturally to "go it alone." He/she is most comfortable in a group setting in which warm personal relationships exist.

Cooperative learning, then, is congruent with the enculturation of Indian pupils in the home. These children work well in small, informal groups in which they share and help one another as they move toward stated learning objectives. Indian students are excellent team players on the basketball court or

football field. It appears that this carries over into academic endeavors as well. Thus it was no surprise to confirm through this research that language development of pupils appeared to be enhanced in classrooms where there was evidence of cooperative learning taking place.

Teacher/pupil dialogue patterns were examined carefully, too. In classrooms where lessons were conducted mainly in the lecture-recitation mode, in which the teacher called upon a student or students for a comment or response to a question but did not encourage dialogue among students, there was less complex pupil speech produced. As pupils proceed through the grades, schooling tends to become more subject-centered and formal. In fact, the noise level tolerated in the classroom in many instances is inversely proportionate to the grade level and age of students.

Native American pupils tend to become less actively involved when the dialogue pattern is more formal. As these students pass from one grade level to the next, oral communication between students and teacher becomes much more restricted. If we believe that children learn to use language by using it, then the lecture/recitation mode is counterproductive to the learning of language, particularly for students who need to practice oral language skills.

The final variable studied was the incorporation of

culturally relevant materials and activities into the daily routine of the classroom. It is an accepted truism that children will talk most and best about what they know. Approximately half of the classrooms visited showed evidence of bringing the culture of the home into the school in various ways. Although differences among classrooms with regard to this variable were not examined statistically, it seemed that the use of culturally relevant materials and activities did impact pupils' attitudes toward and performance in school in a positive manner as indicated by the speech samples.

Of course if the teacher is from the local community, bridging the gap between home and school is easier. Many of the teachers whose classrooms were included in the study either were non-Indians or Indians from other tribes or locales. But it appeared that if the teacher was concerned enough to become involved in the community and to make efforts toward building positive relations between families and the school, the end result was a more comfortable and relevant teaching/learning setting for pupils. In these classrooms, there was greater spontaneity of speech, more dialogue and a more productive atmosphere for learning, especially the learning of language, because pupils felt more comfortable with the teacher and the curriculum.

As a result of this research, I have generated various conclusions which might be helpful not only to teachers of Native American pupils, but also to others who work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

To begin with, it semms crucial to utilize open and informal classroom organizational patterns imbedded in a supportive psychological climate; to group pupils for a variety of purposes and employ cooperative learning techniques. It is important to allow for the individual diversity of pupils on the one hand, but to emphasize group competition rather than individual competition in the academic setting.

Large group, formal lessons in the lecture-recitation mode should be avoided. Instead, it is more productive to encourage student-to-student dialogue and group problem solving techniques whenever possible. Because the teacher often is a "significant other" in the lives of children, particularly young children, it is wise to utilize encouragement and positive reinforcement in liberal amounts. Employ language-lifting techniques and modeling of correct language patterns but refrain from correcting pupils' oral language errors--except during formal language lessons. Listen sincerely to what pupils have to say and praise efforts (the process) rather than focusing on the product as we do so often in the classroom setting.

In order to plan a language program which specifically addresses the needs of pupils, it is critical to determine where pupils are with respect to where they should be at the end of the year. Tape record segments of students' speech in a variety of settings during the day and listen analytically. The more successful language programs appear to be those which the teacher has modified in terms of the specific needs of students in the class. Language goals for the year may remain unchanged. But intermediate objectives, along with the materials and activities selected to meet these objectives, must be based upon the sound professional judgement of the teacher.

For culturally and linguistically diverse pupils, such as the traditional Native American population, the language program must be sensitive to enhancing of the self concept and prideful identity of pupils if it is to be effective. Thus the home culture has to be incorporated into the school setting and culturally relevant materials and learning experiences must be used if optimum language development is to take place. Further, the classroom atmosphere must reflect this culture with displays of pictures, books, articles and the like which are consistent with the home life of students.

It is important that the teacher avoid cross-cultural behavioral comparisons and judgements. It is more effective when the teacher approaches the classroom as a learner first and a

teacher second. There is so much to be learned from pupils and their families if one is open to new experiences. If teachers are to bring home and school closer together, it is imperative to know as much as possible about the families of children in the classroom, their life style, values, aspirations and so forth. It is impossible to know too much about the students with whom one works if planning and decision-making are to be effective.

Involving families in the on-going activities of the school is an important component of an effective program, too. Parents can and will help in so many ways if they feel welcome at school and are encouraged to participate. Parents, and grandparents, also, can help teachers learn about the language of the home, too. In this way, teachers are in a better position to determine the specific language needs of pupils in learning standard English as a second language or dialect.

Summing then, on the basis of the present study, the sociocultural context which appears to be most effective in promoting optimum language development of Native American pupils can best be described as one which employs an open and informal classroom organization and which promotes small group activity within flexible time parameters; in which there is a great deal of pupil autonomy and pupil-to-pupil dialogue; in which pupils

have a more personal relationship with an empathetic teacher who understands the home culture of students and who uses this culture as a springboard for classroom learning experiences as evidenced by culturally relevant materials and activities incorporated into the curriculum. If Native American pupils are to achieve to the maximum in school, educators must direct attention to the sociocultural context in which language learning, indeed all learning, takes place. A supportive context will result in greater numbers of Native Americans making a significant contribution to the mainstream while retaining their sense of identity within their own culture.